

LAUNCH OF YEAR BOOK AUSTRALIA, 2005

21 JANUARY 2005

I am very pleased to have been invited to launch *Year Book Australia 2005*, the principal reference work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and one of its flagship publications.

While this represents the 87th edition of the Year Book, 2005 is a particularly important year for the Australian Bureau of Statistics as it marks a century of service by the national statistical agency to Australian governments and the Australian community. One of the interesting articles in the Year Book is a description of the development of the national statistical agency over that period.

Statistics underpin our democracy and have clearly helped shape Australia, by providing government, business and people in all walks of life with the information they need to enable them to make the right choices now, and to plan for the future. They show us where we stand today, how we got here, and help us decide what directions might be open to us tomorrow.

Former Labor Prime Minister Billy Hughes once said:

'There are only two people I trust, God and the Commonwealth Statistician. 'That is some reputation to uphold but I believe the ABS does it well.

So the story of the ABS and its predecessor agencies closely mirrors the modern history of the development of our nation, our economy and our society.

And just as the early Australian pioneers would hardly recognise what we see around us today, the ABS is a vastly different organisation to that founded by our legislators and statisticians a century ago.

Statistics have been collected in Australia since the beginning of European settlement. The yearly dispatch to London of a statistical report on the new colony's population and the availability of food supplies helped the 'mother country' keep track of the development of the fledgling settlement.

As colonies multiplied on our continent and agriculture and commerce grew, statistical reports became more complex, and dedicated statistical officers were appointed, some of whom developed international reputations for their expertise. By the end of the 19th century, each of the self-governing colonies had a statistical office. The statisticians in each state cooperated in the conduct of the Federation Census in 1901.

However, in the constitution, the country's founders had given the Commonwealth Parliament the power to make laws with respect to – among other matters – census and statistics. The *Census and Statistics Act 1905* was given assent on 8 December 1905, bringing into being the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, primarily as a body that could publish national statistics. In those days, most of the data collection activity was undertaken by state agencies but that has changed remarkably over time.

Through the statistical record, we can gain an insight into what life was like for our forbears or our more recent families at any stage of those 100 years. And *Year Book Australia*, whether in the traditional bound paper form, as a CD ROM or on an easily accessible web site, is a marvellous window into our history, our present and our future, through its presentation of hard facts linked to analysis and trends.

For example, a remarkable graph on page 97 illustrates very clearly how different the age structure of our nation is today, compared with a century ago. In those days the numbers of people in age groups over 45 shrank noticeably until there were very few indeed over 75. The graph demonstrates today's comparable distribution by age showing much healthier numbers in the middle years and considerably more people living beyond 85.

Interestingly, the proportion of Australians born overseas has not changed much over this time. However, 100 years ago migrants mostly came from the United Kingdom and Ireland whereas today the mixture is much more diverse and Australia's culture has been enriched as a result.

The Year Book shows us that at the time of the launch of the Bureau, the average life expectancy of a new born boy was 55 years and of a girl 59 years. Today boys can expect to live to 77 and girls to 83.

On the economic side, the Year Book graphically illustrates the changes in Australian industry over the Bureau's century. The contribution of agriculture, forestry and fisheries to GDP has shrunk from 19.4% in the early 1900s to 3.7% today. In contrast, the relative contribution of services industries has increased dramatically, nearly doubling since the early 1960s. In fact recently, the property and business services industry overtook manufacturing as Australia's largest industry. Third, behind manufacturing, is the finance and insurance industry.

Manufacturing, which peaked at just under 30% of GDP in the late 1950s and early 60s, has declined to 11%, about the same as it was in the early 1900s. And yet, as the Year Book points out, the level of output of manufacturing and of agriculture has not diminished; there has simply been more dramatic growth in other industries.

If we look at how the collection of statistics has developed over the century, I can think of no better example of change than the ABS's biggest recurring statistical project, and the one that involves every Australian household most directly: the census.

Apart from its role in the setting of electoral boundaries and the distribution of government revenues, the census serves as a detailed geographic snapshot of the Australian population.

The first national census organised by the Bureau was in 1911. The population was less than 5 million, but the Bureau staff, assisted by 8,000 temporary employees, had to sort more than 4 million cards, physically counting the cards for each tabulation. Needless to say, the results took a long time to release, and were further delayed by the outbreak of World War I.

By contrast, our first census of the 21st century, in 2001, was the first to use intelligent character recognition to aid in the efficient processing of an immensely greater amount of data, contributed by households representing a population approaching 20 million. Furthermore, census results are available much more quickly and with much greater detail. Next year's census, I have no doubt, will also break new ground as the ABS continues to embrace technological advances.

An area that affects us all is price inflation. The Consumer Price Index or CPI compiled by ABS has been a part of Australian life since 1960. It was the 'Harvester' ruling of 1907 which set a basic wage of 42 shillings a week, and led to the adoption of the 'A' Series Retail Price Index as a means of adjusting that basic wage. In those early years the index looked at the prices of groceries, dairy products, meat and house rents.

Successive indexes ranged more widely across goods and services as Australia's way of life developed and statistical needs became more complex, adding such factors as clothing, household goods, fuel, lighting and transport. During the 1950s home ownership overtook house renting, private cars had greatly affected public transport usage and electrical goods such as television sets became important to Australians.

The Bureau's efforts to reflect such changes in meaningful statistics led to the launch of the CPI, which continues to serve Australia well.

Other changes in the use of statistics have occurred in the very important area of Commonwealth-state financial relations, in which the ABS and its predecessor have had a pivotal role.

In the first 10 years of Federation, the Commonwealth paid to the states three-quarters of the customs duties collected each year, based on population figures provided by the Commonwealth Statistician. Today, the GST revenue is distributed to the states and territories according to a Commonwealth Grants Commission formula, which draws on state and territory population estimates, and other statistics, produced by the Australian Statistician.

Such examples show that there have been remarkable changes in the type of statistical service provided by the Bureau over the past 100 years. There have been equally notable changes in the way statistics are delivered.

The first Official Year Book of the Commonwealth was published in 1908. It was entirely set by hand for printing because the first Commonwealth Statistician, George Handley Knibbs, had little faith in the capacity of the machine setting available at that time to keep pace with continual alterations as fresh data came to hand during production.

In those early days most statistics were provided through Commonwealth and State Year Books and through annual statistical reports. The key national statistics produced by the Bureau were about population, births, deaths, marriages, shipping, foreign trade, banking, insurance, cost of living, labour and wages.

It goes without saying that before the advent of computers, collecting, compiling, tabulating, printing and distributing statistics was a manually demanding task. And statistical users had to rely on the media, the mail, or libraries to obtain

the published statistics they needed.

Such constraints placed limitations on the collection and publishing of statistics, limitations that seem unthinkable with the skills and technology now available to the ABS. Today, the Bureau produces a much more extensive range of economic, social and environmental statistics than its predecessor did a hundred years ago or at any stage during that century, providing a wide-ranging picture of contemporary Australia.

And, while printed publications such as the Year Book still play an important role, the majority of users today access ABS statistics through a range of electronic data services. ABS data and services are today not only available directly from the ABS via its web site and consultancy services, but also via public libraries and university networks and various intermediaries.

As the ABS enters its second century, Australians can expect the tradition of excellence in collecting, compiling and publishing statistics for the benefit of our community to continue, giving present and future generations the benefit of taking a good look at themselves with the help of 'a high quality, objective and responsive national statistical service'.

It now gives me great pleasure to officially launch *Year Book Australia 2005*.